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SUBJECT: MEDIA AUTHORITY TO MUZZLE RELIGIOUS STATIONS?

REF: A. KINSHASA 295

[1](#)B. KINSHASA 234

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: The Congo's media authority reportedly decided in late February that religious-based radio or television stations should not be permitted to broadcast political news. If true, this would cut off a significant source of information for many Congolese. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. According to local press accounts, the High Media Authority (HAM, roughly equivalent to the FCC) decided in late February that religious or "thematic" radio and TV stations cannot broadcast commercial ads nor can they broadcast political programs. The HAM gave three specific religious radio stations 15 days to submit their program schedules, ostensibly to review whether or not these stations are broadcasting prohibited material. HAM members also reportedly called for "more responsibility" among journalists and urged political leaders to refrain from using the media to heighten tribal, ethnic or regional conflicts.

[1](#)3. For the moment at least, religious stations are continuing to broadcast news and political programs, possibly because the HAM has not yet issued a formal document from its plenary session. According to the President of the Association of Congolese Community Radios (ARCO), the only religious stations that are currently limiting their broadcasts are stations in and around Goma in North Kivu province that appear anxious not to irritate the local authorities.

[1](#)4. The president of a prominent media-related NGO and the president of the National Union of the Congolese Press both claim the 1996 press law gives media stations the right to use half of their broadcast time to air non-thematic programs or programs of local interest. The President of the NGO stated that the HAM's position contravenes the press law.

[1](#)5. COMMENT: The press law actually states that the government can grant subsidies in the form of indirect assistance to private media organizations that ask for them on the condition that these organizations devote at least half of their programming to cultural, educational and social broadcasts. Even if the HAM's position does not violate the letter of the press law, it is not conducive to the development of a free and responsible press.

[1](#)6. COMMENT CONTINUED: As radio is the sole medium that the overwhelming majority of Congolese have access to, restrictions on political reporting in the electronic media would greatly inhibit the free flow of information - and just at the time when a free political debate is needed more than ever. With a new constitution soon to go to a referendum, and with the nation's first-ever free elections to follow, restricting news would be a major step backwards. END COMMENT.

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